



## ONE

The modest apartment that Kirby, the French bulldog, shared with two humans and a box turtle was being disassembled.

“What is going on here, OB?” Kirby asked the turtle, who sat quietly in a glass aquarium on a table near the window of a back room.

The turtle stretched his long neck and crawled over the rocks covering the bottom of his tank to peer at the activity around them. “Gee, I don’t know,” he said after a few moments. “It looks like they’re taking stuff away.”

“Yes,” Kirby agreed. “But to where?”

The Frenchie trotted across the room, claws clicking on the hardwood floor, and jumped onto an ottoman to gaze out the window. On the street below, he saw his humans, Tom and LeeAnne, carrying boxes from the building and loading them into a truck parked on the sidewalk.

*Interesting*, Kirby thought, watching their every move with his large, unblinking eyes.

“What do you see?” OB called from his tank just as Kirby spotted the old man from across the street shuffling over to speak to his humans.

“Silence, terrapin!” the Frenchie commanded, raising a tiny paw. “I must listen!” He leaned closer to the window, tilting his tall, pointy, bat-like ears toward the conversation below him.

“So, you’re leaving the neighborhood?” said the old fool who smelled like pepperoni and medicinal rub.

*Leaving?*

“Yeah, we’re sorry to go, but we’ve always wanted to have our own house in the suburbs,” Tom replied.

*House? Suburbs?*

“You two will certainly be missed,” said he who would soon be dust. “But that dog of yours . . . he is going with you . . . *right?*” The walking corpse laughed nervously as he turned his gaze upward and locked eyes with Kirby in the window.



“I’ve been nothing but nice to him,” Kirby muttered indignantly. That ancient bag of withered flesh could have easily met with an “accident” after the many times he’d offended the Frenchie, but Kirby had always been merciful.

“Oh, yes,” LeeAnne said quickly. “We’re hoping that the suburbs will mellow him some.”

“*Hmmmmm*,” said the old man, whose bones would shatter like glass if he were to fall just the right way. “Well, best of luck to you both.”

Kirby had heard more than enough and turned from the window to consider the facts.

“Well, Kirby?” OB prompted from inside his glass domicile.

“We’re leaving this place,” the Frenchie said, chewing the words and starting to enjoy their flavor. He jumped down from the ottoman.

“Leaving?” OB squeaked. There was fear in the box turtle’s question—fear of the unknown, fear of what it all meant.

But Kirby feared nothing, and this could very well provide him with what had been missing from his boring life . . .

*Opportunity.*

“We’re going to the suburbs,” Kirby said, slowly stroking the whiskers on his chin. “Now, doesn’t that sound . . . *interesting*.”

He began to drool in anticipation.





Kirby would have loved to collect a blood sample from the human, curious if something miraculous had occurred at the genetic level to allow the skin of a human being to turn such a fiery shade of red.

Tom let out a roar followed by a flurry of unintelligible nonsense as he pushed through the stacked boxes to survey all that Kirby had wrought.

The Frenchie locked eyes with his human, waiting for a sign that his plan was about to reach fruition.

Tom's furious gaze fell upon something amidst the destruction and he gasped.

"No," he cried in a choked whisper, leaning forward to pick up a torn and soggy piece of comic book cover with trembling hands. "No, not this," Tom wailed. "Please, not *Lazer Lasses* #1! Anything but that!"

Kirby *woofed* one last time, a gentle prodding, a final reminder that he had been responsible, and punishment—*banishment*—was in order.

Tom turned on the French bulldog. "You!" he roared, the veins in his neck pulsing angrily. "You are a bad dog!"

Yes, Kirby silently agreed. *Yes, I am a bad dog and you must throw me outside.*

As if on cue, the human reached down, grabbed Kirby by the collar, and yanked him into the air.

*Yes, that's it,* Kirby urged. *That's the spirit!* He caught a quick glimpse of OB inside his tank watching with wide-eyed horror and gave him a thumbs-up as he was hauled from the room. *Success!*

The scolding seemed to go on for an eternity, the humans taking turns as they wagged their fingers in Kirby's face and told him, repeatedly, how disappointed they were.

*Yes, yes, get on with it,* Kirby thought, not even bothering to make eye contact with the pair as they admonished him.

They took him outside, to the center of the weed-covered lawn, and chained him to a tree. Even this far from the garage, his acutely sensitive Frenchie hearing could pick up the alluring sound.

"Honey, do you think it's safe to leave him out here?" LeeAnne asked her husband.

*How cute,* Kirby thought. She was actually concerned for his safety, after all he'd done. *Fool.*

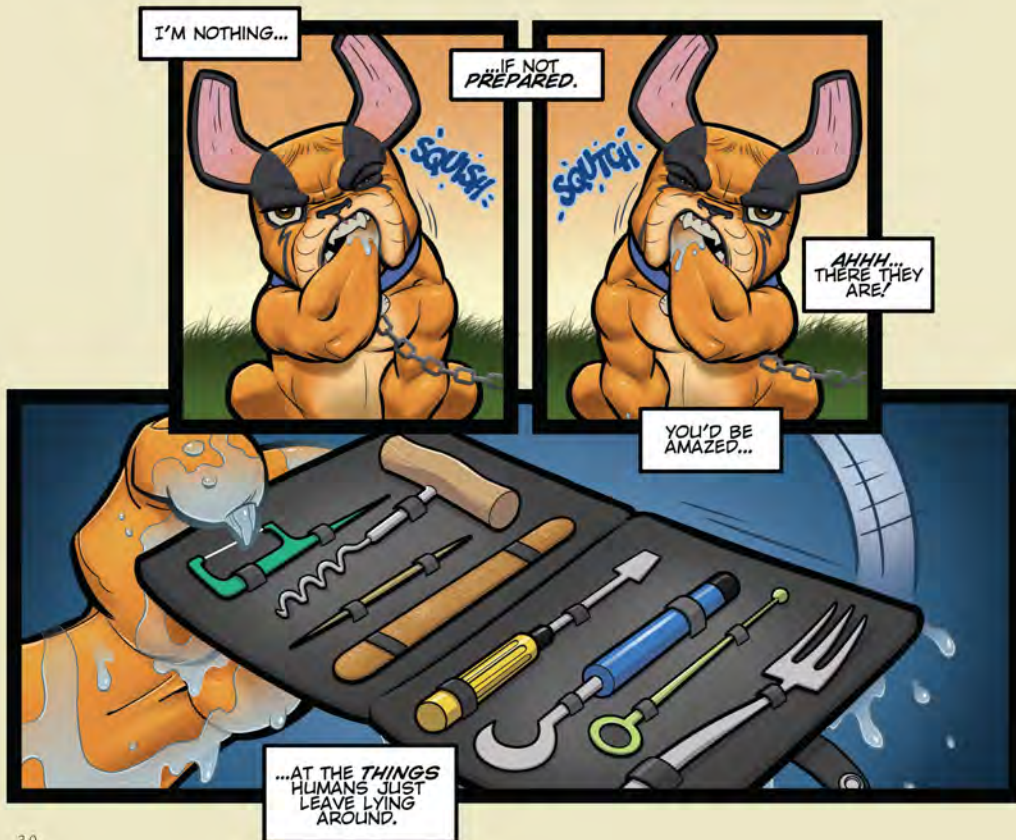
"He'll be fine," Tom replied curtly, then took his wife's elbow to escort her back to the house. "He has to learn that there are repercussions for bad behavior."

"If you say so," LeeAnne said, uncertainty in her tone. "You be a good boy," she called over her shoulder to Kirby. "We'll let you back inside as soon as we get stuff put away."

Yes, yes, yes, *be off with you*, Kirby thought, eager to be alone so he could begin his investigation of the garage.

Finally his humans were in the house and out of sight. The sound from the garage drew him like a beckoning hand and Kirby moved toward it—only to be jolted back to the harshness of reality when he reached the end of the chain.

With a heavy sigh he sat down upon the weed-covered ground and reached up to feel about his fleshy jowls, searching for something hidden away for just such an emergency.



With practiced precision, he used the tools to unlock the heavy chain from his collar and then returned the tools to his jowls.

Free of his restraints, he cautiously moved toward the garage, circling around the back of the rickety structure so as not to be seen from the house.

The garage's side door was open, and Kirby stopped to listen.

It wasn't just one sound—there were multiple sounds coming together to form a cacophony of noise that called to him. The fact that his humans could not hear it was just further evidence of the inferiority of the human species.

Kirby slipped inside the cool darkness, the scents of dust, rotting wood, and the passage of time tickling his keen sense of smell. His eyes darted about, searching, but found nothing that could be making the sounds.

But still he heard them, close by and yet . . .

If he was any other rational being, he would have begun to doubt his own senses—but he was Kirby.

And in Kirby's world, there was no room for doubt.

He moved farther into the garage, ears twitching. The sounds grew more distinct, but their source continued to remain a mystery.

Kirby hated mysteries with a furious, Frenchie passion.

The garage was filled to near bursting with *stuff* that had obviously been left behind by the home's previous owners. Old, water-stained boxes were stacked along one wall, their corners nibbled by rodents. At the far end, shelves bolted to the wall displayed old jars and coffee cans of various sizes, and to the right of them hung a pegged wallboard where rusted and dust-covered tools still hung. To the right of that, larger wooden crates were pushed up against the garage wall, loaded to overflowing with what looked like scrap metal.

Kirby stood still, eyes taking in every detail of his surroundings, and suddenly it hit him like a rolled newspaper.



*This shouldn't take long*, the Frenchie told himself.

OB had come to stand beside him. "That was incredible!"

"Was it really?" Kirby asked him, unfazed by the act. "To the likes of you, I imagine it would be."

He concentrated on the severe metal door before him.

"Are we gonna try to get in?" OB asked in a fear-filled whisper.

"Try?" Kirby scoffed. "Lend me your shell," he ordered OB, who promptly dropped to all fours, allowing Kirby to stand on his back.

"Can you reach it?" OB grunted, watching as Kirby studied the numeric keypad to the right of the door.

Kirby leaned in close, examining the keys, and felt his frustration grow. He was certain that he could eventually crack the code needed to give him access, but the amount of time required . . .

"Well?"

"Silence, I'm thinking," Kirby growled. He was about to begin the process of finding the correct series of numbers when . . .

*Click!*

Kirby reared back, unsure of what had just occurred.

"What happened?" OB asked, extending his neck to see. "You got it open already?"

"I did no such thing," Kirby said, watching as the heavy metal door swung inward with a haunting creak.

"Well, if you didn't open it . . . who . . .?" the turtle whispered.

"Let us see." Kirby stepped off of the turtle's shell and through the door without a moment's hesitation.

"Wait!" OB yelled. "You don't know what's in there!"

"Exactly," Kirby said, the lure of the mystery drawing him into the room like an electromagnet pulling metal filings.

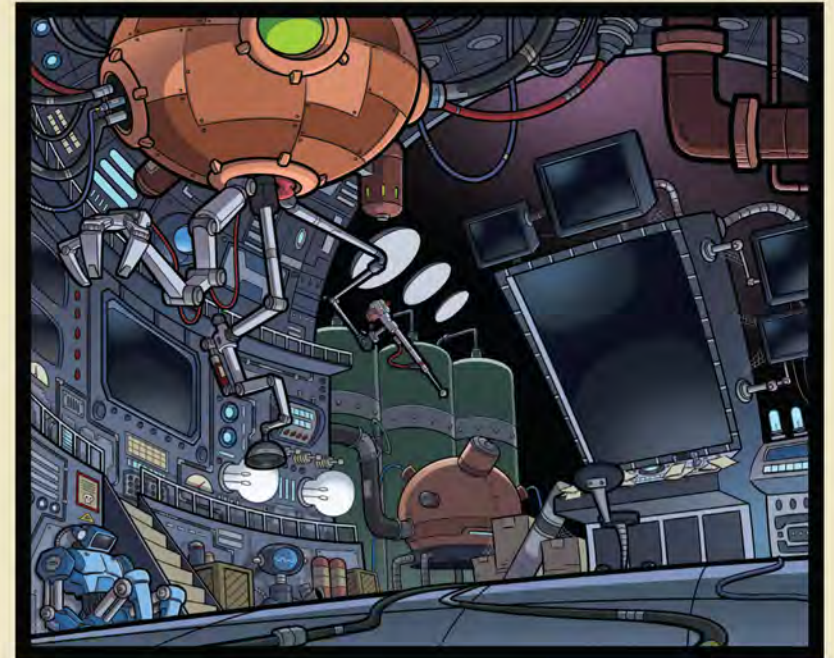
Kirby stopped just inside the door, his round eyes attempting to understand the shapes that he could barely discern in the darkness.

"Well, what's in there?" OB asked nervously, still standing outside the door.

"I can't see," Kirby said. "It's too dark. Go back to the house and get me a flashlight," he ordered, forgetting in his eagerness how excruciatingly slowly the turtle moved—he'd be lucky to have the flashlight within a day and a half.

But it didn't matter, for no sooner had the words left Kirby's mouth than the lights came on, illuminating the mysteries of the room. The machines within came to life as well.

All Kirby could do was stare in awe.





SUNRISE.

IT UNFOLDED AS I FORESAW.



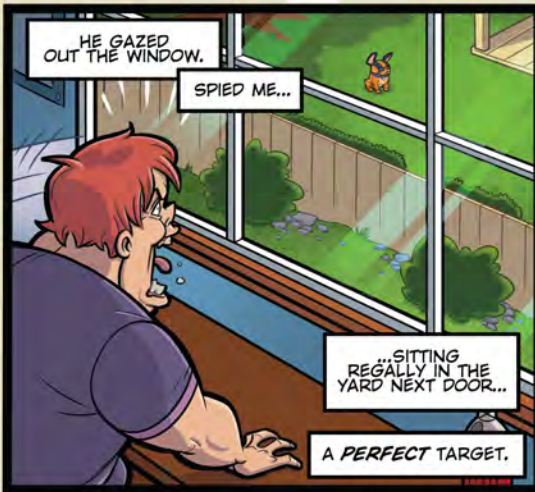
THE STEMPLEWORTH ABOMINATION WAKES...

...FROM HIS SLEEP...



YAWWN!

EAGER TO BEGIN ANOTHER REVOLTING DAY UPON THE EARTH.



HE GAZED OUT THE WINDOW.

SPIED ME...

...SITTING REGALLY IN THE YARD NEXT DOOR...

A PERFECT TARGET.



THE TWISTED YOUTH COULD NOT CONTAIN HIS EXCITEMENT.

HE GRABBED HIS MEGA-SPLASHER 4500 DELUXE...

...AND BOUNDED FROM THE HOUSE.



HE CREEPT ACROSS THE YARD...

...TOWARDS THE FENCE...

...AND HIS UNKNOWING VICTIM.



BUT STEMPLEWORTH IS A FOOL...

...WHO DID NOT KNOW PRECISELY...

...WHO HE WAS DEALING WITH.



I SAID THAT THE INSECT WOULD PAY.

THAT THERE WOULD BE A RECKONING.



THEY ARE RIGHT ABOUT REVENGE, YOU KNOW.

THESE FEEBLEMINDED CREATURES.



REVENGE IS A DISH BEST SERVED...

FOOM

